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ABSTRACT

A study examined the problems that four graduate students of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds encountered during their initiation to the written discourse community of American academia during their first year of graduate study in the United States, and how these problems were dealt with. Qualitative data including participant and faculty interviews, observations, analysis of writing samples, and reflective journals kept by the subjects were collected. These data illustrated the kinds of difficulties the students encounter in the process of adapting to the requirements of a discipline-specific written discourse. The difficulties reflect the complexity of writing as an activity that can be viewed from at least three perspectives: cognitive; social; and cultural. Results suggest that international students bring with them to the U.S. classrooms writing experiences that sometimes differ from the writing conventions of American academia, and need assistance in successfully adjusting to the new academic environment. However, this assistance will only be available if both international students and their faculty are made aware of intercultural differences in writing and explicitly address them. (Contains 46 references.) (Author/MSE)

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"If You Don't Tell Me, How Can I Know?": A Case-Study of Four International Students Learning to Write the U.S. Way.

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[1] Order in which the names appear was determined by tossing a coin.

Abstract.

The purpose of this study was to examine the problems that four graduate students of various language and cultural backgrounds encountered during their initiation into the written discourse community of American academia during the first year of graduate studies in the U.S. and the ways these problems were dealt with. Qualitative data including participant and faculty interviews, observations, analysis of written samples, and reflective journals kept by the participants, were collected. These data illustrated the types of difficulties that these students encounter in the process of adapting to the requirements of a specific disciplinary written discourse. These difficulties reflect the complexity of writing as an activity that can be viewed from at least three different perspectives: cognitive, social and cultural. The results of the study suggest that international students bring with them to the U.S. classrooms writing experiences that at times differ from the writing conventions of the American academia and, therefore, need assistance in order to successfully adjust to the new academic environment. This assistance, however, would only become available if both, international students and their U.S. faculty were made aware of the fact that inter-cultural differences in writing do exist and that these should be explicitly addressed.

"If You Don't Tell Me, How Can I Know?":

A Case-Study of Four International Students Learning To Write The U.S. Way

In recent years the number of ESL students entering U.S. graduate schools has constantly increased. Most of these students are considered unprepared for the rigorous demands of academia. Yet we have little knowledge of the processes through which these students acquire the conventions of different disciplinary discourses necessary for the successful completion of their graduate programs. Disciplinary enculturation (Jolliffe and Brier, 1988) is a complex process that involves not only the acquisition of content knowledge but also learning the value systems and the definitions of the field, as well as acquiring academic literacy which includes both reading and writing professional discourse. The growing tendency in U.S. universities toward establishing stricter standards of writing proficiency is an issue that directly affects ESL students. They are held to the same stringent standards of writing ability as their English-speaking fellow students and this places them at a severe disadvantage since research in first language and second language writing indicates salient differences between the two in terms of both composing processes and texts produced (Kaplan 1966; Krapels, 1990; Silva, 1993; Morague e Silva, 1991; Connor, 1984, Connor, 1996).

Over the years, second language writing research has focused initially on the textual features of written discourse (e.g., Connor, 1987; Hinds, 1987; Connor, 1984; Choi, 1988; Reid, 1988; Lin, 1989) and later on the processes ESL writers employ (e.g., Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1983; Henry, 1993; Silva, 1990; Arndt, 1987; Krapels, 1990). Recently, however, with the new tendency in first language composition to shift its focus from the cognitive processes of composing to the social contexts of writing (Nystrand, 1989; Bizzel, 1989; Berkenkotter and

Huckin, 1995), ESL writing research has also turned its attention to studying writing as socialization. Several volumes have contributed to the study of writing in specific community, context or genre (Swales, 1990; Rubin, 1995; Ventola and Mauranen, 1995; Belcher and Braine, 1995; Fox, 1994; Tucker, 1995).

The new approach sees writing as a social phenomenon with political as well as social implications. It draws from the work of sociolinguists and ethnographers of communication like Hymes (1974), Heath (1983) and Gee (1990). Major concepts in the social-constructivist approach are 'speech community' and 'discourse community'. Gee, for example, sees literacy practices as "part of the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values and beliefs (p.32). To him such practices constitute discourse with a capital 'D'. He defines Discourse as an 'identity kit' that comes "complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, speak and write"(p. 142) so as to enable a person to take on a particular social role recognizable by others. In his influential work "Genre Analysis" (1990), Swales defines discourse communities as "sociorhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals" and genres as "the properties of these communities that are used in the communicative furtherance of those sets of goals" (p. 9). Proponents of the new approach contend that learning to write a specific genre entails not only knowledge of the language and its rules but also knowledge of a set of social practices that surround the use of that text.

Recently there have been several studies in the field that focus more on the context in which writing takes place as well as on the experiences of ESL students in the initial stages of acquiring discipline-specific discourses (Zamel, 1990; Johns, 1991; Spack 1997; Leki, 1995; Leki and Carson, 1993; Prior 1991; 1995; Connor and Mayberry, 1995; Casanave, 1995; Swales, 1990; Belcher, 1994). Results from such qualitative research show that writing demands

on ESL students are considerable and vary across the curriculum. Learning to write in one's discourse community is a complex process that involves not only the acquisition of academic literacy as well as "the conversations of the discipline" (Bazerman 1988) and "the prevailing paradigm" (Myers, 1990). Findings from the research seem to suggest that there is not a single academic discourse community with unified standards and expectations but rather that every specific discipline has its own conventions, values and practices. Casanave (1995) goes even further to suggest that in studying situated writing we should consider not the global factors of the disciplinary community but "the immediate, local and interactive factors" that touch students' lives directly in the process of constructing the writing context.

Research on the socialization of novice writers has enhanced our understanding of disciplinary writing. However, it is also marked by some limitations. First, while the research seems to be polarized into humanities and science studies, most studies tend to focus on the experiences of students in the field of natural sciences or within business communities (e.g., Herrington. 1985; Connor and Mayberry, 1995, Braine, 1995; Connor and Kramer, 1995). Although it is true that these disciplines seem to attract a large number of international students, it is also true that they have to do less writing, usually in "well-defined genres", (Braine, 1995) in contrast to students in the humanities. Also, it seems that most of the science students, due to lower TOEFL scores, are required to take some composition courses in either the ESL programs or the English departments, specifically aimed toward improving their writing skills. Students in the humanities. however, often enroll in graduate programs directly as a result of high TOEFL scores (Spack. 1997) and are required to do extensive writings in genres completely new to them, without any writing preparation.

Another methodological limitation seems to be the focus of some studies only on the textual features of disciplinary genres (Braine, 1995). Although such results help us understand what features might be difficult for non-native students to acquire, they do not explain why it is difficult for these students to learn how to use specific text genres. Last but not least we should mention the lack of longitudinal studies of graduate students' writing ability development. Most of the research to date examines only a short period of time in a student's academic life--usually one semester, or focuses on the writing assignments for only one course (e.g. Leki, 1995; Connor and Mayberry, 1995). In order to investigate "the long and ever-changing process of acquiring – that is internalizing and gaining ownership of academic literacy" (Spack, 1997, p. 4) we need longitudinal studies that provide information about non-native students' experiences during at least their first year in U.S. graduate schools.

Three second language longitudinal studies are worth reviewing briefly since they set out to investigate the long and painstaking process of initiation in academic literacy by employing multiple sources of data (Casanave, 1995 and Spack; 1997). Spack (1997) follows an undergraduate student through three years of study in social sciences and English courses looking closely at the development of both writing skills and reading strategies. Ray's (1990) study focuses mostly on the English composition courses and proficiency exams taken by an undergraduate student from Iraq. Casanave (1995) investigates the experiences of twelve first-year graduate students in sociology, trying to find out how they learn to think and write in their disciplinary community and more specifically how they construct contexts for writing within the discipline. These three studies introduce us to the experiences of motivated, intelligent and talented students who nevertheless are frustrated because of "writing problems" that their professors cannot tolerate. The findings point to the conclusion that the underlying issue is not

that students cannot write but rather that they think and write in ways different from the dominant discourses of U.S. academia. Non-native students have problems learning how to do "critical analysis" as a result of a different "relationship with text and authorities that is taught, both consciously and unconsciously, by family members, friends, teachers, the media, even the history of one's country" (Fox, 1994, p.125, emphasis added). It is worth mentioning that there seem to be no studies that inform us about the possible influence of non-native students' political background on the process of socialization into U.S. academic discourse. We need more research that involves students from countries other that those in Asia, South America and the Near East. In the last few years after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, many young people from the ex-socialists countries and the former USSR came to the U.S. to pursue degrees in a number of disciplines. To the best of our knowledge there have been no studies on the problems these students meet with during the process of enculturation in the new academic discourse.

One other issue that has been largely discussed in recent studies on second language writing socialization is the question of whether international students should be expected to become fully accepted members of the U.S. academic discourse or whether they should preserve their identity and sense of self by communicating, i.e., writing, in their diverse cultural ways. There seem to be no easy answers to this dilemma. Some students are here to stay and they intend to become full-fledged members of the U.S. academic community. In this case it is to their advantage that they master the intricacies of the new discourse as early as possible. For the rest of the international students who come to the U.S. only to pursue degrees, a better solution seems to be to try and maintain a competence in writing in two distinct academic discourses. Their goal should be the acquisition of a maximum number of features of the new discourse, while at the same time preserving the uniqueness of their writing in the native language. Perhaps

they should strive to become not only bi-cultural but also bi-literate by building a multicultural literacy. It is obvious that researchers should try to work with students from diverse cultural, educational and political/ideological backgrounds in order to begin to understand the numerous factors that influence the process of initiation into specific academic discourses and discover what "good academic writing" means and how and where it is learned.

Our goal in undertaking this study was to find out more about the process ESL graduate students go through while acquiring specific disciplinary discourses. With this purpose in mind, we addressed the following questions: 1. What problems do international students encounter in the process of becoming members of a specific U.S. academic discourse community- that of the graduate program in Foreign/Second language education?; 2. To what extent does the first language cultural and political background of ESL students interfere with the process of their socialization?; 3. How do these students adjust to the demands of academic writing in the specific disciplinary discourse? 4. How can the problems associated with this adjustment be minimized?

Methodology

Participants

Participants for the study were selected from among the non-native graduate students enrolled in the Graduate School of Education at a large northeastern U.S. university. Parameters for selection included no previous experience within a U.S. educational institution, similar English language proficiency as indicated by the TOEFL scores, and enrollment in courses that required a significant amount of writing as part of course work. Another criterion included in the selection process was that the participants come from countries with a history of authoritarian

government. Only two students accepted to the program met the last requirement. They, together with two other students were selected to participate in this study.

(insert Table 1 about here)

Design and Procedure

The study has been designed as a nine-month ethnographic case-study of four ESL students' academic writing in English. Sources of data included: interviews with the participants and their professors, observations of the classes in which the participants were enrolled, focus-group discussions, reflective journals, and written assignments produced by the participants (including homework, exams, drafts of papers, papers with the professors' comments and evaluations). Originally, think-aloud protocols were to be used for data collection. However, due to the fact that some of the participants found this way of working very disturbing, we decided to substitute the think-aloud protocols with reflective journals. The extensive amount of data as well as their variety were gathered with the purpose of ensuring data triangulation and presenting a thick ethnographic description (Geertz, 1973) of the writing processes and experiences of our participants. Sources of data are summarized in Table 2 below.

(insert Table 2 about here)

Data Analysis

Analytic induction was used to analyze the data. The transcripts of the interviews and the think-aloud protocols as well as the entries from the reflective journals were read and examined in search for salient and recurring themes related to the process of acquisition of the new discourse of U.S. academic writing (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Spradley, 1980). The large number of specific individual problems that each participant met with during that process were reexamined

for possible logical groupings. Repeated analyses of the data seemed to suggest that the problems encountered in the process of learning the new type of discourse could be subsumed under the following three major domains: attitudinal, cognitive and social. Several factors considered to be of less importance were grouped together in an additional fourth group.

The data from the observation transcripts were used as a source of additional information on the specific behaviors each of the subjects exhibited in the new academic environment. These observations were particularly helpful in learning about the personal characteristics of each of the participants, thus providing a better understanding of the specific approach each of them employed when coping with his/her academic writing. The data from the interviews with the professors revealed a different perspective on the non-native academic writing. These data were not used in categorizing the problems interfering with the students' adjustment to the academic written discourse for the main purpose of this study was to examine the student perspective on the process of becoming a member of the new Discourse. The data from the professors' interviews are reported under a separate heading and are used to illustrate certain instances of miscommunication between professors and students. Figure 1 below illustrates how the data were used.

(insert Figure 1 about here)

Results

Profiles

Nurwulan. Nurwulan is a 38-year-old Indonesian woman, married with two children. She came to the US on a government grant to do her Master's in TESOL. Nurwulan has completed her higher education in Indonesia. She finished a three year college program majoring in English

and earned a diploma allowing her to teach in high schools. She started working right after college and taught English to high school junior and senior students for fifteen years. Nurwulan has a rich degree of experience as an English teacher. She has worked in the field for fifteen years and has written an ESL textbook for high school students. During the past several years Nurwulan had been working as a teacher trainer in Indonesia. Several times a year she travels to the capital city to train future English teachers. In 1995 she was selected along with eighteen other teacher trainers from different fields to come to the U.S. and get their Master's degrees in education.

Yan. Yan is a twenty-six year old man from Taiwan. He is single, young and eager to study. He arrived in the USA in the summer of 1996. This is his second visit to this country. Five years ago he took a class in Linguistics at Stanford University and decided that it would be good for him to get his Master's degree in the US. Yan graduated from a Catholic university with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology. He is a highly motivated student. Part of his motivation is his own drive. He wants to get a degree from a U.S. university and to improve his English at the same time, but he thinks that taking English language courses only is a waste of time since his TOEFL score is high enough. He says, "One day I'll go back to psychology. But in order to be a psychologist, your English should be perfect. On the other, hand I have always been interested in language. I think language is something fascinating. That is why I chose the TESOL program." A second motivating factor is his cultural and educational background. He has received his schooling in Taiwan where education is considered essential for success, and it seems that he has been brought up to be an achiever.

Mila. Mila is a 42-year-old Russian woman who moved to a West African country twenty years ago. She holds a five-year university degree in history, sociology and English from a university in the former Soviet Union. In West Africa she worked first as a high-school English

teacher, and later as assistant professor at a university. Apart from a degree from Russia, Mila also holds a Master's degree in English Language Teaching from a British University. Mila notes that, "coming to study to the US was entirely [her own] decision." The doctoral degree, according to Mila, will open for her the doors to publishing because "[her] country is in strong need of textbooks." However, as she notes, "it is extremely difficult for one to publish without having a doctoral degree, and... publishing is something I've been thinking for a long, long, long time." Mila's plans for the future, besides writing textbooks for her students, are to go back to her country to teach.

Andrey. Andrey is a forty-three year old male from Russia. He lives and works in a city north of Moscow where he is a university instructor of Russian as a foreign language. As a Russian language lecturer, he teaches U.S. students who go to Russia to learn its language and culture. Andrey received his five-year university degree from the Saint Petersburg State University majoring in teaching Russian as a foreign language and with a minor in Spanish. Ever since his graduation he has always worked as a Russian language teacher and lecturer. He started lecturing in Russia, but later in his carrier he gained international teaching experience when he obtained Russian lecturer positions in Cuba and Syria. After that, he returned to Russia and started teaching at the university where he was a lecturer up until his arrival in the US. He plans to continue teaching when he returns back home. Andrey's plans while in the US also included co-authoring a Russian language textbook with one of his U.S. colleagues.

Attitudinal problems

Motivation and expectations. All participants were highly motivated to come to the US to pursue their studies. There were, however, differences in the extent to which they were aware of

the academic requirements at a U.S. university. Yan appeared to be the only one who made it a point to prepare himself actively for his graduate studies by taking courses in academic writing. The rest of the participants were rather distressed to find that they were expected to write extensively.

Attitude towards writing. All four of our participants had experience in writing in both their first and their second languages, but their experiences differed in terms of the amount and nature of writing. Both Mila and Yan considered themselves to be good writers in their first languages, while Andrey and Nurwulan did not express a positive attitude towards writing. Our data suggest that some explanations for their attitude towards writing could be found in students' experiences with writing as well as the feedback they received from their teachers. Yan had a lot of experience in first language writing both in school and at the university. All his exams were written and he received excellent grades. Mila did not have to write extensively in her native language while in school or at the university. On the occasions that she had to write, she always received the highest grades.

On the other hand, Nurwulan never liked writing. She rarely had to write since neither in school nor at the university was she given any written assignments other than simple grammar exercises or multiple choice tests. When recalling his years at school, Andrey mentioned that he never liked writing and never excelled in it. As a university student, he wrote a few term papers and a master's thesis which he believed to be of a rather average quality.

The participants' attitude towards writing in English can be analyzed from different perspectives. In terms of their preferences for written versus oral assignments, all of them except Mila stated that they would rather write than speak in English. As one of the them put it, "when I'm writing, I have more time to think and revise. When I speak I have to express my thoughts

spontaneously and this is difficult." This difference between Mila's attitude and the other participants' attitudes towards types of assignments could be attributed to the fact that Mila had more experience with spoken English than the rest of the participants.

In terms of the types of written assignments that they had to complete, the participants' attitudes spread along a continuum from negative to positive. The least preferred were purely academic papers such as literature reviews. Next along this continuum were summary and memo writings. All four of the participants seemed not to have problems with assignments that were less formal and somewhat personal in nature. These results seem to support the findings of Leki and Carson (1997) who found that students' least preferred type of writing was "text-responsible prose" in which the writers are responsible for "demonstrating an understanding of the source text" (p. 41). Just like Yuko, the graduate student from Spack's study (1997), who was conscious of "a difference between informative and analytical discourse" (p. 46), the participants of this study were aware of the different types of writing assignments.

Attitudes towards writing were also influenced by the participants' motivation in taking specific courses. In one of his interviews, Andrey says, "when you really like something, you do it with your feelings and it comes out better that when you do something for a course that you don't like." Another factor that was found to affect the participants' attitudes towards writing was how clear the professors were in their instructions for and expectations about the assignments. Generally, our participants reported that it was difficult to write for those professors who were not explicit as to what they required for a particular written assignment.

With time, the attitude of the students towards their academic writing gradually changed. At the beginning of her studies, Nurwulan, for example, was terrified by the idea that she would have to write an academic paper. Once she exclaimed, "A paragraph is too much for me - it's a

monster!" Towards the end of their studies all four students felt much more confident with their written assignments but it took them a great deal of time and effort to accomplish this.

Cognitive problems

Topic choice. All four participants seemed to invest a great deal of time and effort in choosing topics for their written assignments. For Yan it was difficult to find a topic because of his lack of experience in the field of TESOL. Nurwulan coped with her difficulties in finding topics by choosing those that were related to her personal experience as a teacher for she felt most confident in her writing when she could rely on her background knowledge. She would often explore the same topic for different courses. Andrey and Mila, in turn, chose to write on topics that were of personal interest to them. As Andrey put it, "maybe because of my age, I write on topics that are of interest to me, on which I have information... Only like this."

Differences in rhetorical style. The peculiarities of the U.S. academic style which were new to our participants constituted a major obstacle for them. Andrey emphasized throughout the study that his native language writing style was completely different from what he encountered in the US, "Russian writing style is quite different, is very different from the U.S. writing style. Americans are more rational so everything has to be concrete i.e., in terms of your topic sentence, how you develop your thesis... In Russian we wander around too much..."

Yan also pointed to the fact that Chinese writing style is different from North American. On the one hand, he describes Chinese as reader responsible, or a style in which "you don't have to explain your ideas in a strictly defined logical way. You have to infer that the audience knows what you mean, so you don't have to state it clearly." On the other hand, he explained that,

"Chinese is very flexible and not easy to organize because there are so many kinds of expressions with the same meaning and it's hard for the writer to decide which one is the right one."

Text structure and organization. All four of the participants had some general knowledge of how to organize their papers. However, participants differed in how much exposure they had to academic discourse in general, and specifically to the discourse of the academic discipline they were studying now. Andrey and Nurwulan both took writing courses at the English Language Institute where they were taught only some general principles of organizing an academic paper into "introduction-body-conclusion". Yan was overconfident about his knowledge of how to organize his papers because he had much experience reading scientific papers in psychology for his undergraduate studies. However, it turned out that the organization of psychology papers was not always appropriate for the papers in Yan's new discipline. During her first semester of studies Mila, the only doctoral student among the participants, was enrolled in a class where she was given written instructions on how to organize academic papers. She explicitly noted that she learned about the text structure in that course and that these instructions were her only source of reference for organizing papers. This finding is in line with Prior (1991), Leki (1995) and Casanave (1995) who comment on the importance of explicit guidelines in the learning of how to write for a specific discipline.

Academic register. Knowledge of field-related terminology turned out to be the major problem for all of the participants. As Yan put it, "I think my biggest trouble is limited vocabulary. I keep using the same words and structures." Other participants also voiced concern about their knowledge of technical vocabulary.

Expressing personal opinion. Yan and Mila shared a reluctance to criticize openly and take sides in writing attributing this to their limited knowledge in the field. As Mila stated,

"Reporting and summarizing somebody's job is OK, but to be critical - I don't know. Our instructors want us to be critical, but it's not possible without enough background reading. The base of good critique is background knowledge."

Andrey pointed to the fact that he deliberately chose articles that did not contradict his opinion so that he wouldn't have to criticize anybody. He noted that the reasons for this might be cultural as well as ideological since "in Russia students were not expected to criticize in their papers for mainly political reasons". Nurwulan also had trouble expressing her opinion freely and got criticized for this by one of her professors. Her explanation for this was that, "the problem with [us] Asian people is that [we] never write any critical remarks." In addition, just like Andrey, Nurwulan mentioned political reasons behind her reluctance to be openly critical in her writing. When asked why criticizing was not acceptable, she said that it was not only cultural but also dangerous because "criticizing people who have power could be considered a subversive act."

Writing process. Generally, all four participants went through the following steps when writing their papers: choosing a topic, finding the relevant literature, selecting ideas related to the topic, outlining the contents of the paper and writing it. There were differences, however, in the way participants used the literature and in the manner in which they wrote the papers.

Yan and Mila described themselves as "one-shot" writers. Yan mentioned that his first draft was always his final version. Both of them would spend a lot of time thinking and reflecting on the topic, but once they decided to write on something, they hated "to interrupt their thinking process." Nurwulan, on the other hand, spent a lot of time writing and revising her papers. She wrote her drafts by hand, corrected and revised them, spending at least one month on each paper before she finally typed it on the computer. Andrey felt that he didn't put enough time into his papers because he was very busy with all the courses he was taking. He admitted that the quality

of his papers was not very good because he was not a fast writer, noting that, "to write one page it takes me three to four hours".

Social problems

Social aspects affecting the learning process were found to be indicative of the students' personality characteristics and styles of learning. The participants fell into two distinctive groups: Yan and Mila were typical extroverts and field-independent learners, while Nurwulan and Andrey were more introverted and demonstrated field-dependent learning styles. These traits were re-emergent during the entire process of adjustment to the new academic discourse and were evident in these students' processes of writing, their written products and their interactions with the faculty.

Personality. Two of the participants could be described as very ambitious students. They aimed for the highest grades and felt deeply hurt on the rare occasions when they received a grade other than "A". They were eager to get feedback from their professors and made use of it to improve their writing. As Yan put it, "The purpose for me to come here is to study. If I go back without learning anything, I would have wasted time and money."

Yan also stood out for his strict self-discipline, "I didn't cut a single class during my four years at college and I'll never do it here. I will feel guilty. To me everything is important." He seemed extremely self-confident in his abilities to cope with academic tasks and his knowledge on the topics about which he wrote, to a point that some professors advised him to tone down his "sweeping generalizations". Mila expressed her deepest regrets when she did not receive an "A" for the papers that she thought to be of good quality. She said that it "hurt her a lot" because she worked hard on them and expected to get a high grade.

The other two participants seemed to be satisfied with lower grades and were not interested in getting their papers back. Nurwulan once mentioned that for her, "B" was enough." According to Andrey, what mattered was to write the paper and submit it, and the final grade was not that important.

Group orientation. Mila and Yan, who appeared to be more ambitious, turned out to have more individually independent working and studying styles. Yan never consulted his peers about his assignments. When in doubt, he would go to the library and search for the relevant information. He stated, "I'm quite independent. I don't like to seek advice. I seldom call on other students to discuss a project. I seldom work with other people on a project. I know that if I haven't written this kind of paper before, I can figure it out myself." Mila also preferred to work on her own. As she put it:

> I didn't like [working in groups], I'll never do it again. When we have four or five people, it's like too many cooks spoiling the broth. Each person thinks that he has the best ideas and you should do it his way... Well, I didn't like it.

Andrey, on the other hand, enjoyed group work a lot and preferred it to working alone:

> I had to write a joint project for [one of my classes]--it was great. One head is good, and two is better. You invest something yours in it and of course you enhance your knowledge as you interact with others during the discussions and so the work is more interesting... I think that there are always some problems but I think that it's the positive feature of this type of work that we are all different... Similarly, Nurwulan admitted that working on a group project was much easier for her than writing a paper on her own. She would always consult her fellow Indonesians, but never any other of her fellow students.

Reaction to feedback and evaluation. None of the participants received detailed comments on their written assignments. When feedback was given, it was in the form of a general evaluation remark at the end of the paper or just a few checks throughout the paper which did not provide our participants with any meaningful information.

Andrey and Nurwulan were indifferent to the feedback from their professors on their written work. As Andrey put it, "writing the paper is what really counts, and once it's written, I don't care about the result." On the other hand, Yan welcomed feedback comments, no matter whether they were negative or positive:

> I don't think there are right or wrong comments. I think they are all useful. I have to think before I reject them. I won't confront the person and argue with him. If I disagree with somebody, I just say, OK. I accept his opinion but this does not mean that I agree with him. I'll never say, "You are wrong". It's my personality and maybe my culture.

On the only occasion that he got a low grade with critical comments, his reaction was rather constructive. He noted that he accepted the comments because of his deep respect for the professor and her experience in the field.

Mila was very sensitive to her professors comments and mentioned on a number of occasions that she was hurt by critical feedback that she received. In spite of this fact, Mila always welcomed professor's feedback on her papers and tried to incorporate it in her writing. Occasionally, Mila disagreed with her professors' critical comments, but she would never consider revealing her discontent. Rather, she accepted the comments as a different perspective on the issue at hand.

Interaction with professors. The participants commented on the fact that the educational system back home was structured in such a way that it did not call for any interaction between the

students and the instructors. On the other hand, all four students were aware that the U.S. educational system required an active involvement of the student in the interpretation of the assignments. This, in its turn, called for a constant interaction with the professors for clarification of ideas and expectations. This fact seemed to create a barrier for all the participants which they could not overcome until the end of the year. For example, in one of his interviews Yan said, "We never challenge the professor's opinion. This has become a part of my personality. I won't even think of going to talk to [my professor]."

Nurwulan mentioned on several occasions that it was not only her culture but also her personality that prevented her from seeking advice from her professors. She explained that since she was a very shy person it was very difficult for her to initiate a conversation. She was never able to call the professors by their first name, although they insisted she should.

Andrey felt indecisive about interacting with his professors outside the classroom. As he described it

> It was difficult to approach [the professors] because I didn't know what was appropriate in this society and in this university in particular in terms of professor and student interaction.. There seem to be a certain barrier which you reach and then you hit the wall. There are certain limits that you reach and then you hit the wall - silence or a vague answer ...

Other problems

Computer use. It turned out that the knowledge about computers and their use in writing played an important role in the writing experiences of our participants. Yan was the only one who was computer literate before starting the program. He knew how to do computer searches for

relevant literature on the topics of his choice, and how to type and format his papers. This knowledge facilitated his writing process considerably. The rest of the participants had no previous experience with computers. During the first semester, they had problems learning how to type and use computers, and at times they felt lost and frustrated. Their limited knowledge forced them to write most of their first papers by hand, and then type them on the computer.

Mechanics. All of the participants were unfamiliar with the U.S. standards of academic paper writing. As they noted, the U.S. professors seemed to assume that all students knew what was meant by following the APA style. While some of the professors marked down the papers for incorrect usage of APA, others seemed not to take into consideration this factor in their evaluation of the students' writing. Such inconsistency provoked a sort of indifference and carelessness on the part of the participants, and none of them showed any interest in improving this aspect of their writing.

Professors' Perspective

All five of the interviewed professors noted that they applied the same criteria when grading native and non-native speakers' papers in terms of their content, while being more lenient on the non-native's grammar mistakes when these did not disrupt the overall coherence. At times, however, these mistakes were distracting and hindered their comprehension of the papers. As two of the instructors put it, "You can't really help it, it's subconscious, it does influence your grading of the papers when you are having a hard time trying to interpret what they are trying to say." For the purpose of reducing the disruptive influence of the surface level problems, they decided to read the papers, edit for grammar, and then later reread and evaluate them for content only.

Most of the professors mentioned that they treated the term papers as a product for evaluation. They did not consider it a part of their task to assist their non-native students in the process of writing:

> My philosophy is that it's not my job to teach them how to write, I'm not a writing instructor. If they have major problems, they should take a writing course, hire a tutor or get an editor... I have referred [one of my students] to the writing center. But after she went there, she said it wasn't helpful.

One of the other interviewed professors noted, "I had falsely assumed that the students had [the knowledge of how to write] and I never even asked myself how and where they've got it." At the same time, as our participants indicated, paper writing was not a common practice in the educational institutions back home.

All professors were aware of at least some of the cultural differences in the educational background and writing style of the students. They were not surprised to see students from Muslim or some of the Asian cultures quote extensively or even reproduce large chunks of text verbatim when asked to reflect on a topic. Their reactions to these incidents was not to interpret this as plagiarism or cheating but ask these particular students to redo their work. It was also noted that the weaker students would rely more on quoting and paraphrasing the source because of their lower language proficiency.

As for topics, professors reported that in the cases when they were given a choice, most international students would choose more neutral topics, like those based on their first-hand experiences, or do a library research of an overview of a topic. The explanation that one of the professors gave for this was that non-natives would choose "less interesting but safer topics" that

did not require personal involvement and a critical stance. Almost all of the professors attributed this to cultural and educational differences.

As for expressing personal opinions, one of the professors mentioned that even when she gave explicit instructions to the students to feel free to take the opposite view in their papers, none of the students did so. Another professor noted that sometimes non-native speakers "lack knowledge of culturally appropriate ways to express opinions in academic papers and in general... there is sometimes a sort of inappropriate directness even though [some of the students are supposed to be] from a very indirect culture." She attributed this to the non-natives' attempts to acculturate into a culture that they perceive as being more direct.

Almost all of the instructors agreed that the non-native speakers' papers were different in their structure and rhetoric. As one of them put it:

> It was sort of a different flow... like a [different] discourse style... and there was virtually no organization, it was like a list of ideas... and they put them in paragraphs that were not unified whatsoever. It doesn't read as quickly because we expect a certain type of progressions of ideas, and theirs is different, it's not difficult to understand, but you have to think a little bit more when you read it.

Another professor noted that, "English is writer responsible, the reader wants to know where the paper is going ... They don't understand the required rhetoric of a paper. [They don't follow the common stages of] overview, purpose, etc., and they make swell conclusions."

As a result of this lack of knowledge of the rhetoric of U.S. academic papers, sometimes the organization of the non-native speakers' papers did not meet the expectations of their professors. In one of the interviews it was mentioned that non-natives were good when they were writing about their personal experiences in their countries, and when they discussed

theories that they had learned or read about, but they would not know that they were expected to have a part in their papers devoted to practical applications.

Coping strategies

Nurwulan. At the beginning of her studies, Nurwulan chose topic related to her personal experience because she felt that she did not have enough background in the area. However, with time she developed a strategy of marking down interesting ideas when reading scientific articles as possible future topics for her papers. In the process of writing, she paraphrased the paragraphs that she had marked as relevant to her topic. Her major problem until the end of her studies remained the organization of ideas into one coherent whole. As for text structure, she reported becoming more knowledgeable on this issue only after she had been given explicit guidelines from one of her instructors. It was only at that point that she realized that there were differences in terms of both types and structure of academic papers. Unfortunately, this happened during her last class in the program.

She did not overcome her timidity until the end of this study and she never consulted her professor or non-Indonesian peers on any of her written assignments. In terms of time management, she mentioned that she had developed a strategy of carefully planning her time because she realized that she needed a lot of time to write a paper and felt very stressed if she had to do it right before the deadline.

Yan. Yan was the only one of the participants who was aware that he would be expected to complete a number of written assignments in his graduate program. He had done his best to prepare himself for this by taking courses in English writing in Taiwan. At the beginning of his studies, however, Yan was confronted with the problem of selecting topics for his papers as a

result of being a novice in the field. After Yan found the focus of his interest in the field, he felt much more comfortable with choosing his topics. In order to cope with the difficulties that a scientific register presented to him, he started to select and memorize entire phrases that he considered appropriate for including in his papers. Whenever he had trouble figuring out the structure of a given paper, he would search for examples in the library. He never consulted his peers nor instructors on the organization of his paper throughout his studies. Whenever he needed help, he would look for it in textbooks or journals. He was very eager to get back his papers and carefully analyzed with the researchers the comments he received. As a result, he improved both his writing style and vocabulary. By the end of the second semester, he learned to avoid sweeping generalizations, a major problem with his first papers.

Mila Mila noted at the beginning of her studies that she both consulted with her instructors on the topics for some of her papers and selected topics on her own for other papers. At the end of the study, Mila said that she realized that it was important to write on the topic that was of personal interest to her and not on the topic suggested by the professors. Mila expressed her unfamiliarity with the U.S. academic paper structure when interviewed at the beginning of this study. She seemed to be able to overcome this problem with time, mainly because one of her instructors introduced the class to the guidelines for writing research papers. Mila used this for almost all of her papers, as her written samples suggest.

Based on her professors' comments and assigned readings, Mila also decided to change her writing style from the very personal and informal one that she used before, to a more scientific and formal style. Several times during the interviews, Mila noted that she decided to imitate the writing style of the authors that she read because she realized that this was what was expected from her. She also expressed her liking of some of her professors' writing or speaking

style, noting that she would try to incorporate it in her writing. Mila also compiled a list of what she called "useful expressions" that she extracted from her readings, which were ready-to-use phrases suitable for insertion in her papers when she "was stuck with writing and couldn't find an appropriate word or construction." Mila's negative experience with consulting one of her professors led to her becoming very careful about consulting her professors for advice; she reported that she would rather avoid doing it at all.

Andrey. Andrey mentioned on a number of occasions that his writing was poor because of his lack of vocabulary. At the end of the first semester, he mentioned that he noticed major improvement in his writing due to both the course in English writing that he had taken, and his increasing vocabulary. Another major change that Andrey reported was that he wrote his first written assignments in Russian and then translated them into English, so his papers looked more like, "Russian sentences in English words." With time, Andrey started writing in English directly, and at the end of the study, he said that it was "so much easier to write in English directly".

Andrey always seemed to choose the topics for his papers himself. While during the first half of the study, he reported spending almost an entire semester searching for a topic for his final papers, at the end of the study he pointed out that he wrote for different classes on the same topic but from different perspectives. This was his way of dealing with what for some students seemed to be a major problem, topic identification. He said that once he determined for himself what his interests were on the basis of his previous Russian experience and his new American one, he did no longer had any problems with finding a topic for his papers.

Andrey also developed an interesting strategy of reading for information on a particular topic throughout the semester and taking notes for future references. This way, by the time he sat down to write a course term paper, he would have plenty of material relevant to his topic and

could usually cover it from different perspectives. Andrey's uneasiness about approaching the professors and his perception of his peers' competitiveness led to his decision to consult neither with his peers nor professors about his problems with writing. He seemed to come to terms with this new reality: "after all, all people were different and so consulting someone could prevent from developing one's own ideas and predilections."

Discussion and suggestions

Many would probably agree that writing in itself is a very complex task when performed in one's first language and a considerably more difficult enterprise when carried out in a foreign language. As our data suggest, by the end of the study all four participants were able to overcome some of the problems affecting their second language writing, at least to a certain degree. Each student's problems were different in nature and varied in degree. However, some of their difficulties remained unsolved. Other researchers (Prior, 1991, Spack, 1997; Connor and Kramer, 1995) have also noted that "writing remains problematic even for successful students at such advanced levels [of education]" (Prior, 1991, p. 304). What our data revealed is that, first, these problems could have been solved more promptly, that is during the first semester, and not by the end of some of the participants' studies. Secondly, these solutions could have come less painfully had the faculty offered their support. And lastly, these problems could have been solved more effectively, so that the students would have learned how to write a field appropriate academic paper early in their studies.

A major source for such prompt, less painful and more effective solutions to non-native students' writing problems, is clearly the students' own personal interest and motivation in improving their second language writing skills. We see another important though perhaps less

evident solution for achieving higher writing competence we see in a more open and regular line of communication between non-native students and their U.S. professors that would ensure "interactive socialization", in Casanave's terms (1985, p. 107). We submit that some of the problems of non-native writers can be attributed to the information gap that exists between them and the disciplinary faculty. Both international students and the U.S. faculty engage in academic interaction that is heavily dependent on their previous experience and background knowledge (Silva, Leki and Carson, 1997). The awareness of the differences existing between such knowledge and experiences seems to be crucial for making student-professor interaction conducive to attaining the ultimate objective of an academic enterprise, that is, the successful acquisition of academic knowledge and skills necessary to fulfill one's professional and personal goals.

The results of this study point out that there is a great amount of information about non-native students' educational and cultural background that faculty are often unaware of but is important for understanding and overcoming the problems that these students encounter in the process of learning a specific disciplinary writing discourse. Examples of such information revealed by this study are numerous. For example, some international students might come from cultures, such as Russian and Chinese as in our study where writing is not as direct and writer-dependent as it is in the U.S. (e.g., Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Hinds, 1987; Kaplan, 1966). Some students, such as all four of our participants, might come from academic environments where writing is not used nearly as much as it is in U.S. universities, where it is considered inappropriate to criticize recognized scholars or even any published works. Different formats might be used for academic papers in the students' native environments. Moreover, foreign students might be totally unfamiliar with the American Psychological Association (APA) standards. These students'

knowledge of the academic register in English in general, and of the specific disciplinary discourse of their field of study, might be limited or lacking. Students might come from cultures characterized in psychological terms as having "high power distance" (Hofstede, 1980), i.e., where students are not expected to seek advice from their professors, or are not allowed or encouraged to engage in student-professor interactions at all. All this information seems to be extremely important in understanding and identifying the non-native students' potential problems in learning to adjust to the requirements of the new written discourse.

In addressing our second research question concerning the influence of the political context of students' home country on their adaptation to the new discourse, we found that our students' writing style was heavily influenced by their country's ideological agenda. The students from Russia and Indonesia expressed their reluctance to be openly critical of authorities and state their personal opinion. Fox (1994) also mentions Chile as another country among those where political aspects of life might be influencing people's writing styles. Further research is needed to see whether such findings would apply to students coming from other ex-socialist countries such as Bulgaria, Cuba, and the Czech Republic, to name just a few.

Despite the numerous problems that the students encountered when learning to write for their discipline, the data also revealed that each of these students was able to find unique as well as similar ways of coping with their problems. Successful coping strategies we discerned among the participants were: starting by writing papers in native language first and later translated them into English; selecting topics of personal interest for term papers; paraphrasing articles for their papers; planning writing well in advance; consulting with peers instead of professors; looking for answers in the published materials rather than from professors; adjusting vocabulary and writing style according to feedback; using guidelines provided by instructors for writing papers;

compiling lists of ready-to-use expressions; collecting information for a paper throughout the semester. It was necessary for the students to make all these adjustments in order to comply with the requirements of the new academic environment and excel in their studies.

We also observed that one problem which arose from the differences in the cultural and educational experiences of the students and their instructors was a lack of clarity in where responsibilities should lie in addressing the students' writing difficulties. While the students often felt that instructors expected them to discover U.S. academic writing conventions and practices almost inductively, the instructors expressed frustration with their students' hesitancy to ask questions or articulate their problems. "If you don't tell me, how can I know?" one professor offered, as an explanation of her own pedagogical behaviors. Our findings suggest, however, that at times, when professors were aware of the differences that foreign students brought with them from their own writing communities, these instructors might not have "exercised" this awareness in such a way as to be beneficial for their students. The results of this study seem to indicate that there exists a lack of sharing of information among U.S. university professors and their international students—information that should be shared in order to make communication successful and interaction fruitful. Once this information is shared, the professors will be able to help their students become successful writers and learners without the students agonizing over what is expected from them and the ways it could be achieved. While it might seem reasonable to suggest that the burden of solving these numerous problems should be carried by the students, in our opinion it is unrealistic to expect that studies like ours would raise the students' awareness and thus help them in any way. Instead, we suggest that some of the solutions to these students' numerous problems could and should come from "external" sources such as the university at large and the faculty during their classes and interactions with their students.

The university at large could offer help by disseminating important information to the international applicants that writing is one of the major tools used in the U.S. educational system for nurturing and assessing students' knowledge. All international students therefore would be expected to come prepared to write extensively during their studies in the U.S. An improvement at the university level, according to Leki (1995), might even involve including student input in establishing the criteria for "good writing", a move which would help "undermine the belief in the existence of university accepted, absolute standards of 'good writing'" (Leki, 1995, p. 44). Another important finding that came from this study and is in line with Spack's (1997) findings that students' high TOEFL scores do not necessarily imply writing expertise. To address this important issue, the universities or departments could find an alternative way of obtaining knowledge about the international applicants' writing abilities in English. This could be done through a closer attention to their Test of Written English® (TWE) results or through requesting them to submit with their applications writing samples in academic English.

Writing courses offered by English Language Institutes often do not prepare graduate students to tackle academic writing because they are focused on acquainting them with generic academic rhetorical models. Some authors (Johns and Connor, 1989, Hamp-Lyons, 1986) advocate that students should be taught discipline specific writing courses instead. Another solution would be to provide adjuncted courses (Jacoby, Leech, and Holten, 1995) which combine training in ESL writing with content drawn from specific disciplines. However, many universities cannot financially afford to offer such courses. An alternative way to deal with this problem could be that departments offer their students a "writing center" that would provide them with the type of assistance they really need in the specific discipline of their studies. Native speakers could also profit from such a center.

In addition, we suggest that professors could help their international students by incorporating into their everyday practices the following:

1. Assign articles that contain views opposite those of the professor, in order to show the students that it is acceptable to be critical and freely express one's opinions and views.

2. Give explicit guidelines, in either written or oral form, as to the organization and style of the different types of academic papers, or of the type that is expected for a particular course and/or assignment. This could be done by providing students with samples of exemplary writing or by including some brief instruction as to the format of required papers in the syllabus.

3. Use a process rather than product oriented approach to student writing; that is, follow closely their progress through a paper, asking for its earlier versions and thus establishing some sort of "writing rapport" and audience awareness. Give students an option of submitting their papers for editing prior to finally submitting them for grading.

4. Raise students' awareness about the appropriate academic vocabulary and field-related terminology that should be acquired and used, as well as about the differences that might exist between the U.S. and other cultures' writing styles.

5. Establish a norm as to what specific standards (e.g., APA, MLA, etc.) should be used for paper and reference format and offering samples of these.

6. Explicitly inform the students as to whether it is appropriate to consult professors during and beyond their office hours and in what form this should be done.

7. Encourage students to share their concerns and ask questions about their writing and written assignments throughout the course and not only at the beginning and end of the course to allow the students to better understand what is expected from them.

8. Urge students to become familiar and proficient with technology available at the university, such as computers, library search engines, the Internet, etc.

Alternatively or perhaps simultaneously, the above responsibilities could be entrusted to a "writing peer", i.e., a senior international graduate student who excels in writing as part of his or her graduate assistantship sponsored by the department. This would create a type of learning environment advocated by Casanave (1995) where students learn through interaction with faculty and peers to become members of their disciplinary communities, or "intellectual villages" in Geertz' (1983) terms.

Conclusions

As the literature suggests, non-native speaking international students are more and more often held to the same strict academic writing standards as their U.S.-born counterparts. At the same time, the results of this study seem to indicate that there exist a number of problems that make writing in one's non-native language for academic purposes an extremely complex cognitive and social task. It seems only logical that in order for these students to meet the requirements, they should invest considerably larger amounts of time and effort than most of their U.S. peers. Unfortunately, oftentimes these students are not able to cope with this situation on their own, and, therefore, need extra help. This help, we believe, could and should be provided by their U.S. professors. As educators they should try to develop an "intentionally inviting environment" (Novak, 1997) for their international students. Then and only then will the situation described in this paper hopefully change from, "if you don't tell me, how can I know," to "tell me, and I will know how to help."

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Table 1 Participants (all names are pseudonyms)

Name	Andrey	Mila	Nurwulan	Yan
Country	Russia	Russia	Indonesia	Taiwan
Class status	Master's	Doctoral	Master's	Master's
Major	Foreign Lang. Ed.	Foreign Lang. Ed.	TESOL	TESOL
Gender	male	female	female	male
Age	42	43	38	26
TOEFL score	547	603	580	603

Table 2 Data Collection Record

Interviews with the participants:
Interview No 1 (Beginning of first semester)
Interview No 2 (Middle of first semester)
Interview No 3 (End of first semester)
Interview No 4 (Beginning of second semester)
Interview No 5 (End of second semester)
Round-table discussion (Middle of second semester)
Interviews with the professors
Interviews with two professors with long-time experience in teaching NNS students (more than ten years)
Interviews with three professors with relatively short experience in teaching NNS students (less than three years)
Observations
Participant observation of two classes in which the participants were enrolled
Non-participant observation of classes in which the participants were enrolled
Reflective journals
Entries made in the journals kept by the participants throughout the study
Text analysis
All drafts and final versions of the participants' written works
Written comments and feedback given by professors on the participants' papers

Figure 1 Data Analysis Chart